

COVID-19: THE INDIAN HEALTHCARE PERSPECTIVE

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“Converting Punishment into Prize”



ABSTRACT

While the onset of COVID-19 pandemic shook the entire world completely, problems were multiple times higher in case of India due to its long-standing urban and rural healthcare divide, socio-cultural beliefs and traditions, shortage of medical supplies as well as healthcare workers and a myriad of administration challenges. In spite of all these odds, India fought COVID in a spirited, coordinated and efficient manner, led by the government at the Centre and the States and amply backed up by the industries and individuals – so much so that today the country stands far more resilient, prepared and pragmatic in dealing with its future challenges – medical and otherwise. The research paper encapsulates India's story of courage and conviction in fighting COVID.

Subject(s) under which the journal should be included:

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KEYWORDS: Aarogya Setu, COVID-19, Government's Response to COVID-19, Indian Healthcare, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package.

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INTRODUCTION

India's Healthcare Legacy

India has remained the mother of medical and surgical innovations since time immemorial. Ever since the Vedic era (5000 B.C. onwards), she has been at the forefront of discovering, defining, and developing the original science and art of healing and healthcare like no one else. From *Charaka Samhita* to *Sushruta Samhita*^[1] (the source codes of medicines and surgeries), from *Ayurveda* to *Yoga* (the most comprehensive frameworks of health, cure, and wellness across mind, body, and soul), from *Panchakarma* (internal and external purification) to *Tridosha* as characterized by the *Vata* (wind), the *Pitta* (bile) and the *Kapha* (phlegm) and their state of equilibrium to derive

the scientific causation process of the physical, physiological and pathological basis of any disease. In brief, a plethora of original contributions made in the field of health and wellness are credited to India.

Evolution of Healthcare Infrastructure in India and its Current State

India has made rapid strides in modern healthcare systems and infrastructure post-independence. There have been considerable developments in the health sector in the last seven decades starting from setting up of a Health Ministry; establishing health as one of the priority sectors in the five-year plans for the government; building nation-wide primary healthcare centres, hospitals, and medical colleges and promoting healthcare infrastructure; professionals, awareness, technology, and state insurance schemes - the list^[2] is endless. Despite this, some chronic issues like thick population density, socio-economic divides, poor literacy rates, etc., continue to weigh heavy on the sub-optimal health indicators for the country.

Today, Public Healthcare in India is delivered through primary healthcare centers^[3] (PHCs) and sub-centers run by doctors and paramedics. At the same time, secondary and tertiary care is rendered through more equipped and advanced forms of healthcare establishments such as community health centers, district hospitals, and medical colleges, primarily at district headquarters.

On the other hand, private healthcare^[4] infrastructure and services are primarily concentrated around tier-I and tier-II cities, bringing a far superior experience to both outdoor and in-patients in terms of quality of care and treatment, albeit to a privileged few.

India's primary challenge is the stark difference between rural and urban India in healthcare delivery quality, availability, and timeliness. That is why the disparities and the challenges to equitable, accessible, and quality healthcare get exposed when compared geographically. The onset of COVID-19 was one such event that tested this inherent, systemic deficiency to the hilt.

Back Drop of the Pandemic – Peculiar Nature of the Challenge faced in India

While COVID-19 spread its dread and devastation quite unselectively, India was faced with a few additional challenges specific to its cultural and social context^[5] illustratively:

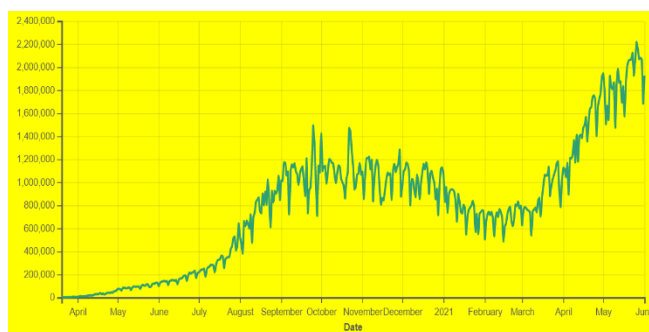
- It's unbridled love for socializing, dining, and gathering on every occasion and even otherwise
- Culture of frequent celebrations in groups
- Enjoying together on festivals across the year, twice a month on an average
- Lack of awareness and scant respect about health and hygiene, especially among the poor and the illiterates
- A large section of the society still riddled with unsubstantiated beliefs and herd mentality on infections and vaccines

The Out Beak of the Pandemic and its Severe Impact in India

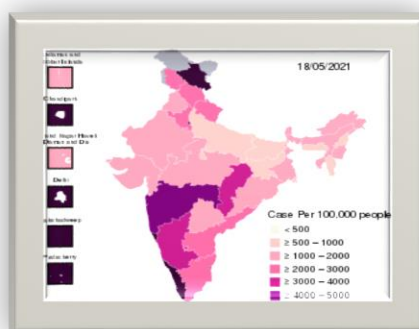
While every country was struck hard by the outbreak of the coronavirus in terms of its magnitude and severity, gaping demand-supply gaps, and widespread disruptions in trade, manufacturing, and services, its effect was multiple times higher in India, as the economy was already in a downward spiral as evidenced by its major macroeconomic indicators like GDP

growth rate of 4.7% registered in 2019 (the lowest since 2013), high unemployment rate, the decline in industrial output of core sectors (the worst in 14 years), stagnancy in private sector investment and reduction in consumption expenditure for the first time in several decades. Besides, the informal sector of India, which is the largest in the world, employs nearly 90% of the total working population and contributes significantly to overall GDP (~45%) was already under tremendous strain due to demonetization in 2016 and GST in 2017.

There was no prior knowledge (and hence, preparedness) on the medical front about the virus and its deadliness, unlike many advanced countries when the deadly virus hit India in March 2020. The lack of medical supplies - oxygen, beds, ventilators, plasma, medicines, injections, tremendous shortage of healthcare workers, doctors, nurses, severe administration challenges in managing ICUs, hospital wards and outdoor patients, prioritizing admissions and treatments of old over young, comorbid over healthy, amid the utmost panic, anger, fear, and deaths and the consequential migration of millions back home^[6] was quite monumental and overwhelming for India. To worsen the situation further, the ferocity of COVID Wave-2^[7] (Mid-March, 2021 till May 2021) disarrayed the entire nation completely. Delta variant, the perpetrator of this wave in India, brought a range of allied health conditions like Black Fungus, apart from psychological disorders like depression, negativity, mental and psychological disorders. It was also a heart-wrenching sight to see caregivers and healthcare workers^[8] themselves falling in heaps during this wave.



Wave 1



Wave 2

India COVID-19 density map – May 18, 2021

India's pattern of COVID-19 spread (Wave 1 and 2)

www.mohfw.gov.in

www.mygov.in/covid-19

India's Response to the Pandemic

Undeterred by the shock and grip of the pandemic, India astonishingly turned herself into one strong team to put up a bold, concerted and spirited fight - managing people and their families who were falling sick and dying, supporting businesses which were getting shut, supporting poor, homeless and orphans, using voice-based messaging on every call to convey strength and solidarity across the nation and reassure millions, activating MyGov Corona Newsdesk, effecting digital benefit transfers in the wake of homeless and jobless and distributing rations at the needy homes, converting hotels and playgrounds into make-shift hospitals, extending credit and insurance digitally, providing online education for schools, colleges and universities and permitting/ promoting work from home and work through VCs, emails and other online mediums, alumni and friend circles coming alive in supporting the distressed, celebs and the rich pouring financial and medical help in their individual capacities and propagating telemedicine route to cure home quarantines– the list^[9] is nearly endless, scripting an incredible and indelible story of courage and conviction.

To control the severity of the deadly virus, the complete lockdown was imposed in March 2020, allowing only the functioning of essential services. Along with it, restrictions were put on domestic and international travel and mandatory quarantines on entry from an international port and between metropolitan cities. The monumental effort of “Janata Curfew” and subsequent lockdown^[10] enunciated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi set the tone of a spirited fight against the pandemic amongst each Indian. They helped the country to get better equipped in tackling the coronavirus outbreak.

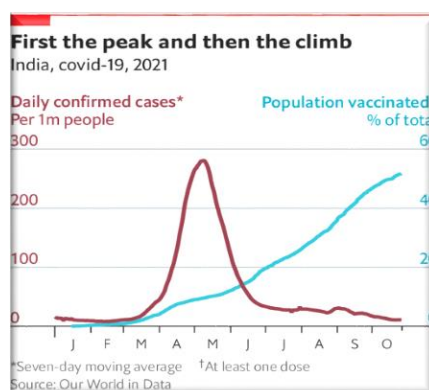
Following the economic impact of the lockdown, PM Modi turned the pandemic narrative on its head when he announced that Corona should be seen as an opportunity to be self-reliant or “Atmanirbhar” that focused on “economic self-reliance” and promoting domestic product manufacturing (“make in India” mission). In line with this, the ₹20 trillion Atmanirbhar stimulus package^[11] was announced by the Finance Minister in May 2020. Besides, a ₹1.70 trillion relief package was announced under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana to assist the vulnerable population, rural community, and informal sector through direct benefit transfer in their bank accounts.

While devising and implementing its unique model against the onslaught of the virus, India also adopted a slew of global best practices^[12] to contain the spread of COVID-19 successfully. This included a robust framework of detection, containment, and treatment; developing and disseminating well-laid guidelines for the public; conducting comprehensive testing and contact tracing; and supporting people in quarantine.

The government's efforts to help the vulnerable sections, the victims and the families were delivered in a mission mode by expediting benefits through Ayushman Bharat, National Digital Health Mission, PM Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, and Insurance cover for COVID Health warriors under PM Garib Kalyan Package. These efforts aimed to make healthcare and protection affordable and accessible for the entire population and, at the same time, offer scope for private players to widen their reach and presence.

Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the healthcare industry swung into a comprehensive action plan in tackling the pandemic, including dedicated COVID-19 hospitals, isolation centres, and tech-enabled mapping of resources. The *Aarogya Setu*^[13] mobile app was widely used, which assisted in syndromic mapping, contact tracing, and self-assessment. *Aarogya Setu* and many such technology apps strengthened India's fight against the pandemic, including delivering essential items in containment zones, teleconsultations with patients, bed management, and real-time monitoring and review by the authorities.

However, the most significant relief and turnaround story started with India's vaccination programme^[14], which began catapulting the mood and condition of the country *en masse*. With a provision of ~₹9.5 billion for vaccine development, India started tonight against COVID-19 in an *Atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) fashion. The first product for the vaccine that was approved in January 2021 by the Drugs Controller General of India was Oxford–AstraZeneca vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India with the market name, "Covishield," while the next in line was BBV152 marketed as "Covaxin" which was developed by Bharat Biotech, in association with the Indian Council of Medical Research and National Institute of Virology.



At the same time, the private healthcare sector^[15] also rose to the occasion in the country's fight against the pandemic while augmenting their capability to deliver COVID hospitalization and treatment under *Pradhan Mantri -Jan Aarogya Yojana* (PMJAY). They provided all the support that the government needed, such as testing, isolation beds for therapy, medical staff, and equipment at COVID-designated government hospitals and home healthcare. Several private healthcare providers picked the mantle and started building outdoor and indoor treatments facilities and equipping it with proper medical supplies and healthcare workers.

India Post-Pandemic: the Gains, Lessons Learnt, and the way Forward

India has done better than many, in fact, better than any. Notwithstanding, there are a lot of lessons that the pandemic has taught us as we move forward confidently.

First and foremost, the country has learnt to imbibe an irreversible sense of health and hygiene^[16], fitness and immunity, protection, and insurance the hard way.

Secondly, the acute shortage of health infrastructure and medical supplies faced, especially in villages and tier-II and III cities during the wrath of the pandemic, has made the country work on shock-proofing its healthcare system to ward off such situations in the future. On the one hand, hospital chains and specialty healthcare centres^[17] are keen to augment their capacities in Tier II and III cities. On the other hand, many hospital chains have started expanding in these cities by setting up small clinics and associating with reputed local doctors. This complements the government's ongoing efforts to enhance beds and related medical infrastructure, especially in villages and small towns.

Due to the sheer magnitude of the pandemic, there has been a marked increase in the awareness of health insurance products^[18] as more and more people are purchasing life and health insurance with each passing month.

Finally, India has taken an unassailable lead in its digital adoption across businesses and daily lives that was thrust on us during COVID times. From purchasing groceries to consulting a doctor, paying bills to attend a VC, learning guitar

to practicing yoga, digital has become the new normal for most. It's only a matter of time before much of our work and lifestyle begins to embrace digital^[19] as its new normal.

The above research bears testimony to India's historic fight against COVID in every possible dimension of its response and recovery. Not just that, it has proverbially converted the punishment into a prize on every front – be it social, medical, or economic.

Thank you COVID, India just got better!

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